

# School funding issue haunts Legislature

By Izumi Hansen - WNPA Olympia Bureau

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OLYMPIA — Compensation, teacher shortage, educational opportunity gap and school districts' operating levies are all on the Legislature's agenda this session as the state Supreme Court's McCleary mandate — along with the court's \$100,000 per day contempt citation — loom over.

The state Supreme Court, in its January 2012 McCleary v. State of Washington decision, determined the Legislature was not fulfilling its constitutional requirement to fund basic education.

The court required the state to fulfill its duties and provide annual reports following the legislative session to ensure “steady progress” toward a 2017-18 school-year deadline.

Basic education, by law, includes the ability to read, write and communicate successfully with a variety of audiences; understand core concepts of a variety of subjects; think analytically, logically and creatively and use technology to do so; and understand how a decision today can influence opportunities tomorrow.

The court in 2012 required the state to reduce reliance on local school tax levies in funding teacher salaries and benefits, and to meet the requirements of a “prototypical school” defined in House Bill 2776, signed into law in 2010. The law required reducing class sizes for K-3 students, funding for all transportation, material and operations costs and providing for all-day kindergarten by 2018.

The court found the state in contempt of the McCleary orders in September 2014. Legislators responded by passing bills in 2015 that fulfilled these requirements.

But legislators failed to produce plans to fully compensate teachers by the end of the 2015 session. So on Aug. 13, the court fined the state \$100,000 per day.

In September, Gov. Jay Inslee appointed a work group to develop a response.

## Teacher compensation

A survey conducted by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction last November showed 24 percent of schools could not find qualified teachers to fulfill their classroom requirements and 69 percent were “struggling” to find qualified teachers.

“We knew about this a year ago,” Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction spokesman Nathan Olson said. “We are just now putting numbers to the problem.”

Some districts fund teachers with local tax levies, which is unconstitutional, according to the Doran decision from 1977 and upheld in the McCleary order.

The work group has introduced Senate Bill 6195 and House Bill 2366.

Both bills establish a task force to develop a plan to fund staff shortages and pay for basic education. The task force would create a plan to fix the teacher shortage and compensation problems by the 2017 legislative session.

“This keeps everybody at the table, keeps us moving in the right direction,” work group member Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Bainbridge, said. “This proposal will hopefully say to the court that we are committed.”

The group could not determine how much local districts spent on basic education, so a cost estimate was not included. But the bill requires collection of that information.

“There is more work to be done,” work group member, Rep. Pat Sullivan, D-Covington, said.

“We have to stop thinking about a silver-bullet approach to funding education,” Sen. Ann Rivers, R-Clark County, added.

## **Local levies**

“There is an adequacy issue and an equity issue” related to school districts’ special tax levies, work group member Sen. Chad Magendanz, R-Issaquah, said. “This equity issue is complicated. The fact that we’re dependent right now on local levies that may or may not pass depending on where you live is a real problem.”

The court said in McCleary that local property tax levies have helped pay for basic education, including teacher compensation.

To fulfill their constitutional duty, lawmakers must fund schools using “regular and dependable tax sources.”

The bills proposed require the Legislature to eliminate school district dependency on local levies by the end of the 2017 session.

— *Contact reporter Izumi Hansen at [hansenizumi@gmail.com](mailto:hansenizumi@gmail.com).*